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SECURITY INFORMATION

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

5 March 1953

SUBJECT: SE-39: Probable Consequences of the Passing of Stalin
from Political Power (Draft)

1. The problem of transfer of authority from Stalin is one of the most complex and dangerous which the Soviet system could face. We believe that this transfer will be initially effected in an orderly manner, and that there will be no immediate external evidence of dissension within the ruling group of the USSR. Agreement seems to have been reached within the ruling group for a collective exercise of power in the name of the Central Committee. In view of the conspicuous and apparently planned elevation of Malenkov since 1948, and particularly his prominent role at the 19th Party Congress in October 1952, it is likely that Malenkov will be the dominating figure for the immediate future.

2. After the first few months, however, a vigorous struggle for power may develop within the Soviet hierarchy. Given the nature of the Soviet state, this struggle will probably be carried on mainly within the walls of the Kremlin, and it is unlikely to develop into open civil war. Out of the contest one man is likely to emerge as supreme. At present Malenkov seems most likely to be the man, but it is impossible to predict his success with confidence.

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3. The passing of Stalin will remove an autocrat who, while ruthless and determined to spread Soviet power, was not reckless. He was acutely conscious both of the necessity to provide a strong industrial base for military power, and of the existence of such a base in the US. Furthermore, he was able to impose his caution on all agents of the USSR.

4. It would be unsafe to assume that Stalin's successor, or successors, will have his caution, his respect for the power potential of the US, or his ability to enforce caution upon all agents of the USSR. Hence it is possible that a shift in Soviet policy may occur, leading to more reckless courses of action.

5. In the near future, however, the new Soviet leadership will almost certainly follow the foreign and domestic policies established during recent years. The recent 19th Party Congress provided an authoritative exposition of these policies. They call for: (1) the avoidance of direct military challenge to the Western powers, while striving through political warfare to divide them; (2) the continuation of the forced development of the Soviet industrial base in preparation for any eventuality.

6. We believe that, on balance, the death of Stalin makes war in the near future less rather than more likely.

7. The probable struggle for power within the Soviet hierarchy, and the certain difficulties attending the establishment of the new regime, will preoccupy the new Soviet rulers and may prevent them, for

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a time, from giving energetic and vigorous attention to the conduct of foreign affairs.

8. The death of Stalin removes not only the dictator of the Soviet Union, but the undisputed leader of World Communism. No successor is likely to achieve comparable status or similar significance as a symbol of the world-wide movement. If the struggle for power within the USSR should be prolonged, Soviet control over the Communist movement outside the Bloc would almost certainly be seriously shaken; in any event it is likely to be somewhat impaired.

9. Kremlin control over the Satellites is so firm that we do not believe it will be immediately impaired by the death of Stalin, unless there should be such a prolonged and violent struggle for power in the USSR as gravely to weaken the Soviet state.

10. Relations between Tito and Moscow are unlikely to change as a result of the death of Stalin. The antagonism was not purely personal, but arose from a genuine clash of national interests. Moreover, Tito has taken action and adopted positions which it would be extremely difficult for him to reverse, and the Kremlin could not recognise Tito as an independent Communist ally without undermining its position in the European Satellites.

11. Tito's prestige and influence as a schismatic Communist leader will expand with the passing of Stalin. This may be most apparent in the increase of Tito's influence over individual Communists and left-wing fellow-travellers, particularly in Western Europe.

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We do not believe that Tito's influence within the Satellites will increase, unless there should be a prolonged and violent struggle for power in the USSR.

12. We believe that Stalin's death will have no immediate effect upon Sino-Soviet cooperation or upon Chinese Communist foreign policies. However, no successor to Stalin will have prestige and authority in Asia comparable to his. The stature of Mao as leader and high priest of Asiatic Communism will inevitably increase with the disappearance of the former supreme leader. Mao will almost certainly claim more influence in the determination of Bloc policy, especially in policies affecting Asia, but he will not seek or obtain leadership of the International Communist movement. The new Moscow leadership will probably deal cautiously with Mao; if it does not, serious strains in Sino-Soviet relations will almost certainly develop.

13. We have as yet no evidence of the impact of Stalin's death upon the policies and attitudes of Western European leaders. We believe that in general these leaders will be disposed to conduct the East-West struggle with greater hesitancy and caution. They will probably be strongly influenced by a hope that East-West tensions may be at least temporarily relaxed, and that disagreeable policy decisions may therefore be postponed. They will probably fear that any Western pressure exerted on the Bloc may hasten the stabilization of authority in the USSR and increase the danger of war.

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